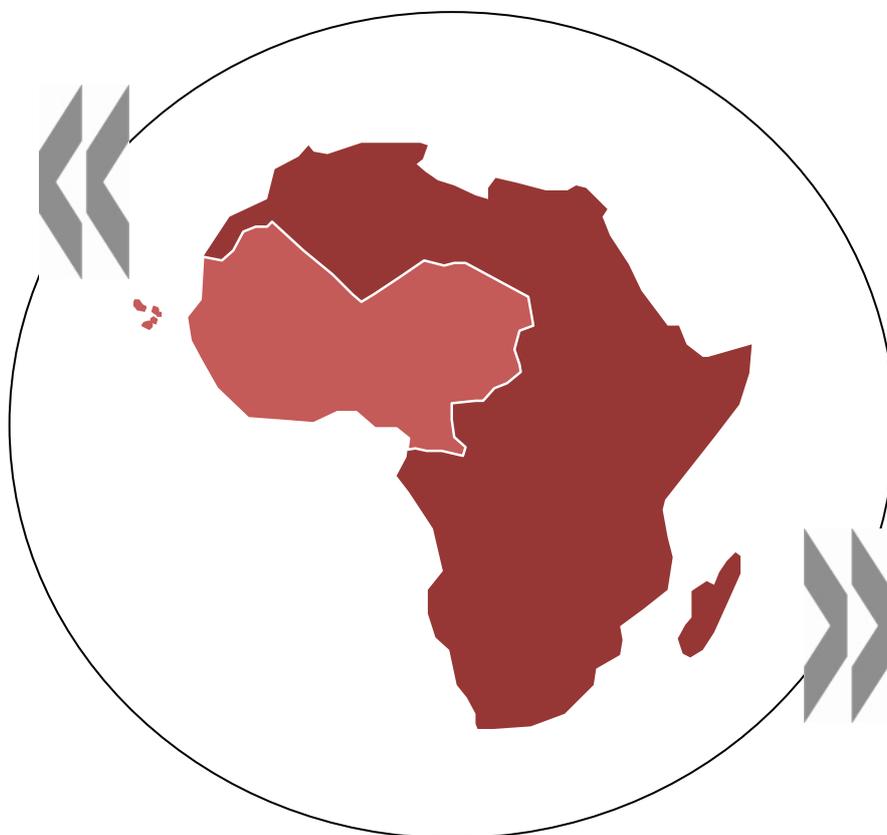


## Workshop on Conflict Systems and Risk Assessment in West Africa – ECOWAS/SWAC joint Work Programme

Bamako (Mali), 2-5 June 2009

→ *“Conflict Systems in West Africa”*  
*Introducing conflict systems with a view towards a regional prevention policy*  
by Massaër Diallo, *Head of Unit Governance, Conflict Dynamics, Peace and Security*



### Sahel and West Africa Club/OECD

Le Seine Saint-Germain, 12 Boulevard des Isles  
92130 Issy-les-Moulineaux



*Mailing Address:*

2 rue André Pascal  
75775 Paris cedex 16  
Phone: +33 (0)1 45 24 89 87  
Fax: +33 (0)1 45 24 90 31  
[www.westafricaclub.org](http://www.westafricaclub.org)

## 1. BACKGROUND AND DEFINITION

---

**The concept of conflict systems** results from conflict analyses and the monitoring of their dynamics and evolutions. In West Africa, examining conflictual situations in the geo-political area of the Mano River countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone) as well as in the Senegambian zones (the Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Senegal) can already assume that conflict systems exist. Moreover, considering Africa in its entirety, the situations in Central Africa (Chad/Sudan-Darfur and DRC/Great Lakes Region) and in the Sahelo-Saharan band (including Mali, Mauritania and Niger among others) greatly support this hypothesis.

Work on these various conflicts stems from the concept of conflict systems not necessarily being linked to a conceptual approach<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, some universities are now addressing this topic.

### *What is meant by a conflict system?*

Conflict systems are made up of all the conflicts within different territories, of various intensities and forms with diverse immediate causes. They are connected to one another in the long-term and feed into each other. They end up obviously being structured by the evolutions and dynamics emerging from the crisis and/or the intended action of predominant actors with converging or common interests.

## 2. CHARACTERISTICS

---

There are three determining elements in the formation, development and evolution of conflict systems:

- ▶ A conflict dynamic
- ▶ Actors
- ▶ Diverse factors

### **2-1 Conflict Dynamics and Polarisation**

- ▶ Although conflicts can be decentralised, there is always an *epicentre*, an initial and/or main source at which it was instigated and where the key stakes originate.
- ▶ The conflict dynamic accounts for the spreading, regression and possible extinction process. This is evident in conflict's spread from its epicentre and/or interconnection between the separated conflictual territories and possible different causes.
- ▶ The dynamic leads to or is shown in the spreading of conflict from its initial and/or main source. It sparks the spill-over to new visibly linked areas or the simultaneous development of several conflicts in different local or national frameworks.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Roland Marchal, *Tchad/Darfour : vers un système de conflits*; Politique africaine No. 102, June 2006. See also Politique africaine n° 88, December 2002 on *La régionalisation de la guerre* ; with a paper of the same author: *Liberia, Sierra Leone et Guinée : une guerre sans frontières*".

## 2-2 Actors making up conflict systems

- ▶ Observing conflicts in Africa shows that a certain “ubiquity” of actors is often linked to cross-border and even trans-national socio-cultural contexts as well as settlement trends.
- ▶ In cases of conflict, these intrinsic dynamics facilitate the spill-over and acceleration of crises because of the diverse links that go beyond local and national borders. The social and socio-cultural dynamics do not always follow the institutional political and state dynamics around which populations have also been more recently organised. They often lead to what Guy Nicolas<sup>2</sup> has called “diverging polarities” with regard to societies and the Nigeria State. Conflict’s scope, configuration and area of expansion are not in essence defined by state territory. They depend greatly on non military, social, socio-cultural and political settlements of actors. Territorial discontinuity does not hinder the composition of a more or less unified conflictual area; notably by pre-existing links among actors who do not necessarily share the same nationality while having the same human and/or socio-political base. Conflict-instigated population movements whose orientation and shape are usually determined by these links which break down the barriers of national differences and state sovereignty for ethnic, historic, geo-political and economic reasons.
- ▶ Actors of conflict spanning several territories are not the same but are connected via family or have close ethnic, religious, ideological, political or economical ties.
- ▶ Converging strategic and/or economic interests among these actors active or evolving in different state areas.
- ▶ Possible criminal collusion of various types of actors, in cross-border areas with regard to trafficking which contributes to the duplication of behaviours, lifestyles and the informal war economy, among others.

These various types and forms of linkages result in the deliberate organisation of areas of conflict.

## 2-3 Structuring factors of conflict systems<sup>3</sup>

There are many structuring factors of various degrees of importance. Set out below are the main aspects that come into play in West Africa:

- **Regionalisation of ecological causes of crises and conflicts** related to the impact of climate change on poverty, socio-economic stability and the future of some nomad or sedentary peoples.
- **Regional geo-political pressure** on existing crises.
- **Cross-border movement of actors and victims of conflict:** rebels, refugees, armed bands.
- **State fragility** in dealing with begrudging pressure on cross-border pools of natural resources.

---

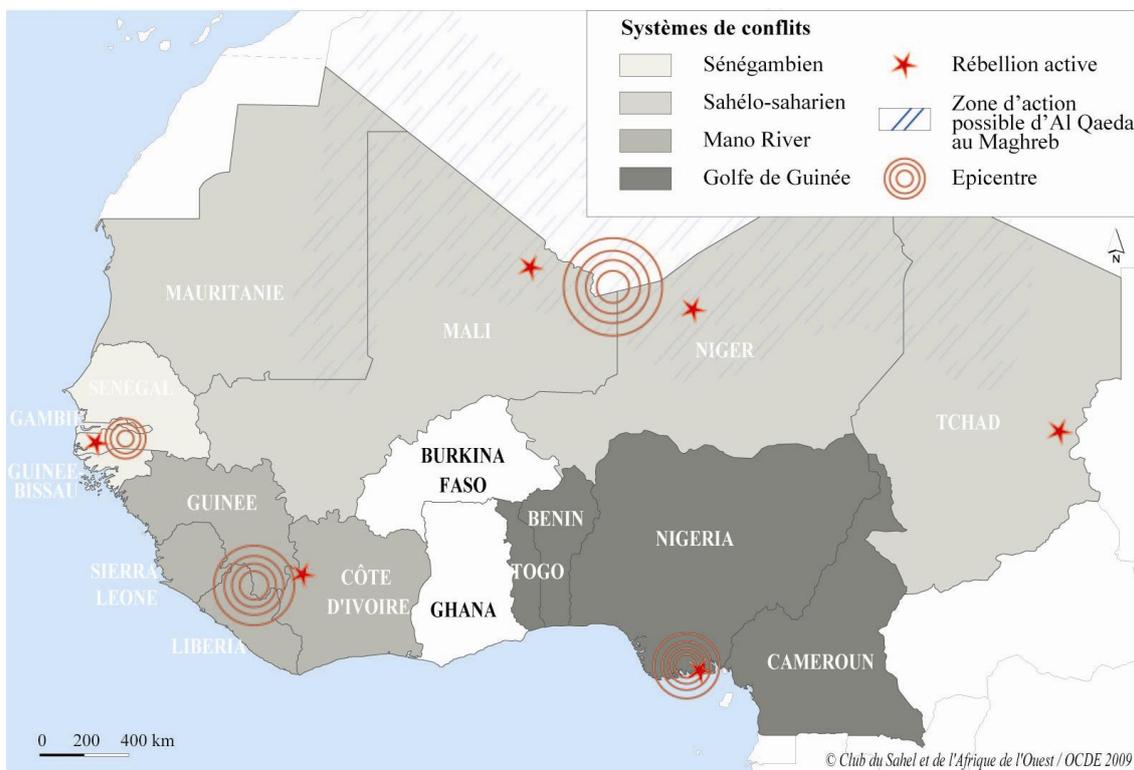
<sup>2</sup>

See: *Le Nigeria : dynamique agonistique d'une Nation à polarisation variable* ; Cultures et Conflits n°1 (1990) ; pp 114-150.

<sup>3</sup>

There are many examples of these factors. With the conflict in Liberia that began in 1989, the effectiveness and interweaving of these factors formed a conflict system encompassing all of the Mano River countries. Instigated by the NPLF (Charles Taylor, who fled to the Côte d'Ivoire), the main source of this conflict began in Liberia but spread to Sierra Leone where the conflict was funded by the trafficking of diamonds found in the east of the country. Guinea was also affected by the development of this conflict. Its transformation involved regional and international forces (ECOMOG, MINUL and MINUSIL) as well as local and national forces in the four affected countries belonging to the Mano River Union.

- **Constitution of a war economy** and plundering in cross-border areas.
- **Link between threats, risks and stakes:** land crises, identity frustrations affecting the same populations in cross-border areas.
- **Circulation of small and light arms throughout the sub-region and the region** (close to 10 million arms are in circulation in West Africa of which more than half are illegally held).
- **Development of transnational trafficking networks** and criminal financing of armed violence.
- **Decomartmentalisation and hybridisation of drug trafficking throughout the sub-region** with rebel movements and networks plundering natural resources, as well as the trafficking of goods and people.



**Conflict systems in West Africa, their epicentres and area of expansion**

### 3. IMPACT

#### ▶ **Internationalisation, expansion and regional destabilisation**

Obviously different conflicts form and have the tendency to set opposing blocs against each other: powers be it national or local, political, state-owned, institutional, or social who were not a priori protagonists in the initial conflict. **This leads to an organised international expansion.** In sub-Saharan Africa, conflict in the Great Lakes region provided such an example at the end of the 1990s. The ongoing crisis in North Kivu confirms this trend. Conflict systems, while being practically asymmetrical generate, through their spreading, obvious risks of classic opposing or exposing conflict with armed confrontation of several countries or groups of countries. This was the case in West and Central Africa: Chad/Sudan; Côte d'Ivoire/Burkina Faso; Guinea/Liberia; and Senegal/Guinea Bissau.

- ▶ **Proliferation of chronic sources of armed violence, instability and fragility: The systemic consolidating of a conflict generates conflictual nebulae.**<sup>4</sup> These factors maintain the crisis through the periodic or occasional mobilisation of peripheral actors who can re-ignite a crisis that is greatly subsiding or of low intensity. This is the case for armed groups, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR<sup>5</sup>) and Laurent Nkunda's National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) in the conflict system of the Great Lakes Region<sup>6</sup>. The same goes for the emergence of the Bakassi Freedom Fighters (BFF) who are spreading out and maintaining a deeply-rooted conflict system in the Niger Delta with the exploitation of natural resources. A conflict system becomes obvious when the many occurrences making up the conflict intertwine indicating alignments and complicity at the same time as **demonstrating coherence in actors' objectives and possible coordinated actions**.
- ▶ **Cross-border settlement facilitating the hybridization of threats to peace and security**  
The peripheral nebulae are generally made up of potentially diverse actors who are established in cross-border areas with many unbalanced political and military forces and capacities. This area, without any direct sovereignty, encourages violent, conflict and security actors to join forces for strategic or tactical reasons. Through activities discontinued due to often low-intensity violence but sustainably feeding into insecurity and instability<sup>7</sup>, these actors are among the main factors of the "transnationalisation"<sup>8</sup> of conflict systems and act otherwise as a cause or, at least catalysts, for their internationalization.
- ▶ **Exacerbating the fragility of states in conflict and post-conflict situations** with a strong hold on drug trafficking networks and plundering of natural resources in government and security sectors and of threats to destabilising political democracy.

#### 4. ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES

---

The study involves clarifying and strengthening the foundations of a global, regional and sub-regional approach to:

- ▶ Early warning and conflict prevention,
- ▶ Management and exit from crisis policies and strategies

<sup>4</sup> This involves diverse actors on the periphery, "satellite-like" and/or parasitic hovering around the main actors on confrontation's front line. These nebulas provoke or accentuate war economies that help fuel conflicts assuring, at least subsidiary, the supply of arms and combatants. There are many examples: militias, bandits known as "coupeurs de routes"; armed bands, satellite armed rebels, fragments of defeated conventional military units surviving by plundering and robbing; combatant groups rejecting the DDR; auxiliary and/or community self-defence groups.

<sup>5</sup> Essentially they bring together Hutu militias of which some were former soldiers in the Rwandan armed forces.

<sup>6</sup> A recent UN Security Council experts report established that the Rwandan Government was providing Laurent NKUNDA's CNDP with support (weapons and ammunition, soldier recruitment including child soldiers, etc.). The same report makes reference to the collaboration between the DRC army and the FDLR.

<sup>7</sup> Even in post-conflict situations (as in Liberia) having greatly neutralised the organised armed violence linked to conflict, persistence or resurgence of strong tendencies towards insecurity conveying also possible effects of the conflict system of which countries were at a given time the epicentre. The system's advanced disintegration allows for the nebula of actors and repercussions on security.

<sup>8</sup> As set out by Marchal (2006), at the transnational level *it is a war system since armed conflicts produce distinct national circumstances and relevant actors, modalities and various issues, coordinated around one another and blurring the spatial, social and political borders which originally defined them* in Conjoncture No. 136, 2006 ; p 135-136.

This would also involve making available specific context-based tools for early warning and rapid response in particular by identifying factors, trends, mechanisms and actors in conflict and peace to obtain sustainable results mitigating the restrictive effects of a simply national and/or sectoral approach to crisis resolution.

Finally, this would entail highlighting the deep-seated causes of conflict. This would involve not only those that are apparent or are re-occurring in order to develop strategies and clarify preventive policies that take into account the possible ignored or ordinarily neglected dimensions.

All of these objectives fall within a strategic monitoring policy on conflict centres and dynamics at the regional level while contributing to their evolution towards peace and security for development. From this angle, the effective involvement of ECOWAS and civil society is greatly important.

## 5. PERSPECTIVE WORK ON CONFLICT SYSTEMS

---

Various questions could guide the work:

- ▶ What are the conflict systems operating in the ECOWAS zone?
- ▶ How is each of them made up?
- ▶ What are their dynamics, trends and impacts on peace, security and development at the local, national, regional and international levels?
- ▶ What are the strategic, political, economic and security measures that could contribute to the peaceful evolution and neutralisation of conflict?

In order to respond to the first question, we are putting forth the hypothesis that **there are four conflict systems in West Africa**:

- *The Mano River system in which Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone are all part of the same conflict group.*
- *The conflict system in Southern Senegambia brings together Senegal, the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. The rebellion in Casamance and the political crisis in Guinea-Bissau fed into this system starting in 1998.*

Although these two systems have not totally and/or definitively disappeared, tension has been greatly reduced. However, there are still contributing factors and potential for crises in Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau.

- Two other conflict systems are forming on the *northern Mali and northern Niger axis*, on one hand, and in the *Gulf of Guinea* on the other, notably around the epicentre of the rebellion in the Delta from Niger to Nigeria. This system affects Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea while impacting security in Benin and Togo. Central African Republic, Chad, Sudan are also implicated by a highly active conflict system around Darfur, etc.

>> Contact: [massaer.diallo@oecd.org](mailto:massaer.diallo@oecd.org)



### Sahel and West Africa Club/OECD

Mailing Address: 2 rue André Pascal, 75775 Paris Cedex 16, France

Visiting Address: Le Seine Saint-Germain, 12 bd des Iles, 92130 Issy-les-Moulineaux, France

Phone: +33 (0)1 45 24 89 87 - Fax: +33 (0)1 45 24 90 31

E-mail: [swac.contact@oecd.org](mailto:swac.contact@oecd.org) / [www.westafricaclub.org](http://www.westafricaclub.org)